

**REMARKS OF FCC CHAIRMAN AJIT PAI  
TO THE CALIX CONNEXIONS CONFERENCE**

**OCTOBER 27, 2020**

Hey, everybody! It's great to be with you. Thanks to Carl and everybody at Calix for giving me this opportunity. To get into the spirit of the Calix Connexions conference, I thought of spelling my name with an X. But dubbing myself Ajit Pax, or "Chairman Peace," felt too presumptuous. For the record, that was my first-ever attempt at a Latin joke—and probably my last.

Carl and I are going to do a Q&A about the Commission's Rural Digital Opportunity Fund in a few moments. So I wanted to use my remarks to talk more broadly about the Commission's efforts to connect all Americans.

I've grown to enjoy these virtual gatherings, but it's been hard not meeting with people face-to-face over the past several months. I took it as a given that I'd be able to see folks in the office and especially on the road.

Ever since I became an FCC Commissioner in 2012, I've made it a point to get out of Washington, DC and meet with people across the country whenever I can. And after my appointment as Chairman in January 2017, I decided to take it up a notch. Over the past four years, I've visited 49 states and two U.S. territories. I've logged about 15,000 miles in some hard-working rental cars.

There's a method to this madness.

On planes, trains, and automobiles, I've held two messages in mind. First, I want to shine a light on how high-speed Internet access, and what I call "digital opportunity," can open up new possibilities for American consumers, one community at a time. And at the same time, I want to explore how the lack of access is causing problems for the people and places being bypassed by the broadband revolution.

These are more than messages. They inform the Commission's two core missions and motivate me to keep pushing forward.

The FCC's first and foremost mission is to help ensure that every American can access advanced communications. On my first full day in this job in January 2017, I convened a meeting of the FCC's staff. I told them that our number one priority would be closing the digital divide and bringing the benefits of the Internet age to all Americans. And for good reason. The FCC's founding statute, the Communications Act of 1934, explicitly directs the FCC to make wire and radio communication "available . . . to all the people of the United States."

And second, the FCC aims to promote innovation and investment across the communications sector. With each new breakthrough, we increase the value of being connected and unlock opportunities to improve the lives of our citizens.

These two missions are more important than ever before. To understand why, look no further than the pandemic.

With telework, distance learning, and the like becoming the new normal, broadband has become vital for pretty much everyone, everywhere. That's why we sprung into action as soon as it became apparent that millions of Americans would need to maintain access to networks.

Back in March, I called on our nation's broadband and telephone service providers to take what we called the Keep Americans Connected Pledge: For 60 days, no consumer or small business would have service cut off or be charged late fees because of disruptions caused by the pandemic. We also asked for Wi-Fi hotspots to be opened up for anyone who might need them.

I know there are a lot of broadband providers in the audience today, and I want to say thank you for answering our call. Within days, hundreds of providers, serving the vast majority of broadband and telephone consumers, had taken the Pledge. That number would eventually grow to nearly 800. Many of you went above and beyond what was in the Pledge, from offering discounts to low-income consumers to increasing speeds for free. Again, thanks to everyone out there who stepped up to make sure that Americans stayed connected during one of the most challenging crises in our nation's history.

The pandemic has ended any debate about the need to expand Internet access to all Americans. The FCC has been pursuing an aggressive agenda to connect all Americans—an agenda that precedes and will outlast COVID-19.

When thinking about how best to promote the deployment of high-speed broadband networks to all Americans, it's important to remember that these networks don't have to be built. Capital doesn't have to be raised. Work crews don't have to be hired to build and expand networks. And the more difficult government makes the business case for deployment, the less likely it is that broadband providers, big and small, will invest the many billions of dollars needed to connect consumers.

That is why, across the board, the FCC has been working hard to modernize its regulations and clear unnecessary roadblocks to network investment.

For example, to promote the deployment of wired infrastructure like fiber, the FCC has made it easier and cheaper for broadband providers to access utility poles—a critical input into building a broadband network. We've also made it easier for companies to transition away from yesterday's copper lines toward tomorrow's fiber networks. We recognize that every dollar that's spent propping up copper can't be spent installing fiber.

There's an abundance of evidence to show this strategy is working.

In 2018 and then again in 2019, the United States set records for annual fiber deployment. And the number of new cell sites in the United States has skyrocketed. We added fewer than 7,000 cell sites from 2012 to 2016, but added over 87,000 from 2016 to 2019, with an increase of over 46,000 in 2019 alone. We've also seen significant increases in broadband speeds. Since December 2017, the average download speeds for fixed broadband in the United States have doubled.

When we talk about broadband in the home, we're increasingly talking about Wi-Fi. With our growing reliance on Wi-Fi, we are going to need faster, stronger Wi-Fi networks. The good news is that Wi-Fi 6, the next generation of Wi-Fi, has already started rolling out. Wi-Fi 6 will be over two-and-a-half times faster than the current standard, and it will offer better performance for connected devices. Calix has been an industry leader in developing Wi-Fi 6 routers, so I know many of you are excited about this opportunity.

To fully take advantage of the benefits of Wi-Fi 6, we need to make more mid-band spectrum available for unlicensed use. And that's exactly what the FCC did earlier this year. On April 23, the Commission unanimously approved my proposal to make the entire 6 GHz band available for unlicensed use. By doing this, we are creating a massive 1,200 megahertz testbed for innovators and innovation. This is a big deal. We are effectively increasing the amount of mid-band spectrum available for Wi-Fi by almost a factor of five.

Ultimately, I expect that 6 GHz unlicensed devices will become a part of consumers' everyday lives. And I predict that our forward-thinking decision will play a major role in the growth of the Internet of Things, connecting appliances, machines, meters, wearables, smart televisions, and other consumer electronics, as well as industrial sensors for manufacturing.

For all these advances, we recognize that there are certain high-cost, low-population areas where the economic incentives for stand-alone private investment just don't exist. For those areas, the FCC has partnered with private companies in order to connect places where the economics don't work without our

help. Our newest initiative—and biggest so far—to close the digital divide in our hardest-to-serve communities is our upcoming Rural Digital Opportunity Fund auction. The \$20.4 billion Rural Digital Opportunity Fund will connect millions of unserved homes and businesses through a two-phase reverse auction that encourages deployment of the best-performing networks for the lowest cost possible. Again, Carl and I will be discussing this program in more detail after my remarks.

The Commission is also going big to promote the deployment of next-generation wireless networks in rural America. This very week, the FCC is voting to establish a 5G Fund for Rural America. The new program will use a two-phase, multi-round reverse auction to distribute up to \$9 billion to bring 5G-capable networks to rural areas of our country that would be unlikely to see 5G service without subsidies. To identify with greater precision those areas of the country where support is most needed and will be spent most efficiently, we will identify areas eligible for 5G Fund support based on new granular, precise mobile broadband coverage data that the Commission will gather through its new Digital Opportunity Data Collection. Just as I hope many of you will participate in our Rural Digital Opportunity Fund, I hope those of you who provide wireless broadband will give our 5G Fund a close look.

Let me close by thanking once again all of you who do the hard work needed to connect the American people. You open doors to the opportunities of the digital age, and for that I am grateful.

And thanks again to Carl and everyone at Calix for this opportunity to talk about the important work we're doing at the FCC. And now I can truthfully say: *veni, vidi, dixi* (I came, I saw, I spoke)!